

NEWS

Mitt Romney tax hoax lands Franklin man 4-year prison term

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For using the online name "Dr. Evil" and pretending he stole former presidential candidate Mitt Romney's tax returns, a Franklin man Monday was sentenced to four years in federal prison.

Ahead of the 2012 presidential election, Michael Mancil Brown claimed he stole candidate and former Massachusetts governor Romney's tax returns from the international accounting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers. The hoax came at a time when Romney was facing scrutiny for not releasing the financial documents.

Then Brown, who federal prosecutors said sometimes used an online alias "Dr. Evil," asked for \$1 million in the digital currency Bitcoin to release, or withhold, the documents.

Court documents indicate the riches Brown received: \$50.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Byron Jones said Brown deserved a prison sentence of four years and nine months, saying a judge needed to send a message about the consequences of the crime and connecting it to issues in the current presidential race.

"It is important to deter others," Jones said. "We're in the midst of another presidential election where again this decision not to release tax returns is again an issue. Other people need to know that's a candidate's decision, whether you agree with it or not. You can't hack in and steal other people's private information. All of us are vulnerable to threats of hacking and hacking hoaxes in the current environment. We need to put a stop to it."

Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump is facing public pressure — including from Romney himself — to turn over his financial documents but has not done so.

Jones said although Romney did not directly participate in the Nashville case, his staff was updated on developments.

Brown was found guilty of fraud and extortion after a trial in May.

According to the sentence, he has to pay more than \$201,000 to the accounting firm for costs incurred investigating the hoax. He must report to federal custody on or before Sept. 22. If he does not, he risks

another felony charge. After his release from prison he faces a three-year probation term.

Senior U.S. District Judge Billy Roy Wilson, who handed down the sentence, denied the defense's request to dole out only probation. Wilson said he wanted to send a message in the "computerized world and information superhighway" that crimes will not be tolerated.

The septuagenarian judge and Vanderbilt University Law School graduate, who normally works in Arkansas but has been hearing cases as needed in Nashville, at one point during the sentencing hearing called his own laptop a "Ouija board."

"I have no doubt that Mr. Brown has a considerable amount of good in him," the judge said, noting that six letters of support were submitted for his consideration. Five of Brown's family members attended the court hearing, and Brown's grandmother spoke on his behalf asking for mercy.

They asked the judge to consider a lenient sentence, saying Brown was abused as a child, used his talents with technology to do good in the community and had two daughters to raise. Jeffery Frensley, Brown's lawyer, noted that Brown had no other criminal history.

"We're just disappointed with the sentence," Frensley said after the hearing. "We'll certainly be preparing issues for an appeal."

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